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No. XXXV.

Facts and Observations relative to THE BEAVER of North-America. Collected by Mr. John Heckewelder, in answer to Queries proposed by Professor Barton.—Communicated to the Society by Professor Barton.

Read November 16th, 1804.

I. PEMAHOLEND, a famous Beaver-Trapper, an aged and much respected Delaware-Indian, and a friend of mine, gives the following account.

The Beavers build their dams for the safety of themselves and their young; and in order to convey food to their houses. They are very particular in chusing the ground or situation upon which they intend to build. They always, in the first place, carefully examine, whether there be near them a sufficiency of trees and shrubs, especially Aspin, Sassafras, and Shellbark-Hickery near at hand, so that they need not venture too far out, to cut them: for the barks of these trees are their principal foods.

They carefully examine the run or brook; whether it be permanent, or does not dry up in the summer season, and whether there be a sufficient quantity of water to extend or enlarge the dam, if occasion should require it.

Having surveyed the ground well, and chosen the time when the waters are neither too high nor too low, they cut down bushes, and drag and lay them in a line for the foundation, which, at this time, has the appearance of a brush-fence. They sometimes make one or more offsets, altering their course as they think best, both for the security of the dam, and to give them advantages.

The foundation being finished, they cut down small trees, from six to twelve, and even fifteen inches, in diameter; and these they cut up into blocks, of three, four, five, and sometimes six feet in length. These blocks they draw by their teeth, walking backwards, to the brush foundation, and place, in a sloping direction, every block, with one end on the brush,

and the other end on the ground, on the inside of the dam. In order that the blocks may not be suddenly removed or carried off (by a fresh) before the dam be finished, they bind them together with brush, as they lay them down, so that the blocks are, in a manner, interwoven in the brush.

Satisfied, that the work so far, is good, they cut roots, small brush (rushes and long grass, if at hand,) and by means of mud or clay, fill up, and daub over, all holes or places, through which the water has a passage: so that when it is finished, it has the appearance of having been made by the hands of man.

They chuse a proper depth of water where they build their houses; both for safety and for an easy conveyance of food. The houses are built of brush, roots and mud (or clay), well covered, and secured against the rain, by being rounded off at the top. Their apartments are perfectly dry, being above high-water mark. The inside is daubed very smooth. Their beds are made of shavings, which they draw from wood, with their teeth, and resemble the finest shavings that have been carefully drawn with a drawing knife. One house will contain from eight to nine beavers, young and old together. They have several passages into their apartments. There are sometimes as many as eight houses in one dam; yet every family is by itself.

They never work at broad-day. In the mornings and evenings they do all their work, both in building, repairing, enlarging the dam, and also in cutting down trees, and digging roots, for provision. They eat no fish, nor make use of any animal food whatever. The bark of Aspin (and another species of Aspin), the bark of the Shellbark-Hickery, the Sassafras entire, and occasionally the bark of the Willow, constitute their principal food, in the winter season. In the spring and summer, they feed on a certain root, which has an agreeable smell.

The Beaver is a very cleanly animal, and cannot bear any thing dirty, or any thing that has a disagreeable smell, about them. Sassafras-bark, nutmeg and Fennel-seed, soaked in rum, or any other sweet or well-scented article, make the best bait for catching them.

In general, they have but two young ones at a litter: but there are instances of old beavers having three, and even four, young ones at a time. A single pair or couple undertake the building of a dam, and when their offspring become too numerous to dwell together in one house, they build for themselves. They drag all by their teeth, and roll none. They take every advantage of the water they can, in conveying materials, food, &c. They are always on guard.

They suckle their young sometimes sitting, and sometimes lying down, much in the manner of a cat. They are extremely fond of their young.

II. SAMUEL, an aged Indian of the Nanticok tribe, brought up near the sea-shore, in Maryland, and formerly a distinguished trapper of beavers, says,

The beavers build their houses for the sake of breeding, for their preservation, and for obtaining food. Their food is principally Aspin-bark, Sassafras, the bark of Willows, and the root of the Water-Lilly. They eat no fish, nor feed on any flesh whatever. They do not like to go far from the water, for their food; and, therefore, they dam up grounds, with a number of Aspin-trees thereon, which may serve them for many years.

They never work in the day-time, but do all their work, in the evenings and mornings. They work together, and keep a watch. In a large dam, there are sometimes eight or nine houses. These houses are very dry, and clean in the inside. They extend their dams, as they find it necessary. In Maryland, there was formerly one dam, which by means of frequent enlargement, extended nine miles. They sometimes cut trees eighteen inches in diameter.

They frequently sit upon their hams, while suckling their young, which stand before them, holding the pap or tit, with their hands (fore-legs). They copulate in the fall, and, in general, have but two young ones at a time: yet sometimes an old beaver has three, and even four, at a time. They are much attached to their young. Are very cleanly.

The beaver is a very cunning animal, so that it requires art and ingenuity to deceive and catch them. They possess great bodily strength; drag all by their teeth, walking backwards.

They view their works with great attention, and know how to apply every piece of wood, brush, or root, in the best manner, and for the security of the dam. They wash themselves, after their labour is over.

III. Account of the beaver by a French trader (at Detroit), who has spent a number of years among the Chippeewas, far to the North of Detroit, and is said to understand beaver-trapping as well as any Indian. Recommended by John Aikin, Esq. as a person of credit. Answers to my queries.

Self-preservation, breeding, wintering, and the greater facility of obtaining their food, are their principal motives for building their dams. Here they live secure, and can pass the winter comfortably, having previously well provided themselves with the necessary food, such as the barks of trees, roots, &c.

In building their dams, they make use of all kinds of sticks, logs, and rubbish, some of which are laid crossways, others in a position nearly upright, but somewhat leaning. For stopping up holes or breaches, they make use of roots and clay or mud; and they are always careful to keep their dams in good order, never delaying a necessary repair.

Their houses are from nine to twelve feet in diameter. Several couple live together in one house; and there are from one to ten houses in one dam. From two to ten beavers have been seen working together. When at work, they keep a watch, who will sometimes ascend to the height of ten or twelve feet; but on the approach of an enemy, or even on only supposed danger, instantly descends, when all the labourers retire to their houses. The female works the same as the male.

They are very fond of their young, which they suckle much in the manner that the cat does. They frequently lean their backs against a tree, while suckling their young ones. In general, they have but two young at a litter; but old beavers are known to have had three and even four young at one litter. I know but one kind of beaver.